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THE MONIST

THE BUDDHIST CONCEPTION OF DEATH.¹

OCcidental scholars frequently represent the ideal of Buddhism as an escape from life and a passing into eternal stillness; but this is an error, for Buddhists do not shun struggle and warfare. If a cause is worthy they will not hesitate to lay down their lives for it, and they will do so again and again in this as well as in future incarnations.

The idea of future incarnations may startle the Western reader; but we Buddhists believe that men appear upon this earth over and again and will not rest until they have gained the end, that is, until they have attained their ideal of life; for lives continue to prevail. It is a feature peculiar to our faith which appeals most powerfully to the Japanese imagination, that man's life is not limited to this existence only, and that if he thinks, feels, and acts truthfully, nobly, virtuously, unselfishly, he will live forever in these thoughts, sentiments, and works; for anything good, beautiful and true is in accordance with the reason of existence, and is destined to have a life eternal. This is the Buddhist conception of immortality.

When, during the war of independence, an American was caught by the British soldiers and condemned to be hanged as a spy, he exclaimed: "It is a pity that I have only one life to sacrifice for my country." Pity, indeed, it was that

¹ Translated by. D. T. Suzuki from the original Japanese manuscript.

Nathan Hale did not know the truth that, from the example he set, there have arisen many patriotic minds inspired with the same sentiment. He did not die, he did not vanish into an unknown region; but he is living a life eternal, he is being born generation after generation, not only in his own country, but also in my country, and in other countries, and in fact everywhere all over the three thousand worlds.

In this respect Masashigé, a Buddhist general still worshiped in Japan as the type of loyalty, had a decided advantage over Christian heroes. He lived about six hundred years ago, and his virtues were not fully appreciated during his life; but when he died he imprinted his immortal soul on the pages of Japanese history. When the Emperor sent him once against the invading army which greatly outnumbered his forces and was led by a very able general, Masashigé had his own plan of making a stand against odds; but some ignorant court favorite succeeded in having the hero's proposition set aside, and by his sovereign's command he was thereby compelled to fight a losing battle. There was nothing for him to do but to check the advance of the enemy as long as possible, so that the Emperor could find time enough to make a safe escape from the capital. Having fought most gallantly, and borne bravely the furious attacks of the enemy, he was finally outnumbered and when, covered with wounds, he saw that further resistance was useless, he gathered his commanding officers around him, bade them farewell, and made this solemn utterance: "I pray that I be born seven times on this earth and crush all the enemies of our Imperial House." Thereupon he drew his dagger to put an end to his present existence, and his officers did the same.

This outlook into future incarnations, which seems to possess no meaning for Christians, makes a very profound impression upon us Buddhists. It seems to be pregnant with

a great religious significance. It implies a continuance of our personal existence in its individuality. Masashigé meant that his work should be continued by worshipers or imitators who would be inspired by his noble example. And most certainly did he find a legion of successors in the loyal and patriotic soldiers and sailors who have died in former wars and also in this recent war with Russia. They all are incarnations of our most beloved hero-general Masashigé. For was he not leading in spirit all these soldiers to the realization of the work he once planned? Can we say that the hero breathed his last when he fought his losing battle some six hundred years ago, while his soul is still living in the heart of every patriotic and loyal citizen of Japan?

When the late commander Hirosé went to blockade the entrance of Port Arthur, he was inspired by the same sentiment which he expressed in his swan song. He was conscious of the immortality of the work to which his incarnation was devoted, and this is expressed in the verse that was to be his last utterance:

“Yea, seven lives for my loved land!
I gladly die at its command.
My heart is firm; I must prevail;
I smile while calmly forth I sail.”

Has not Masashigé's soul found a true expression in the consciousness of this brave patriot? For otherwise he could not have enjoyed that serenity which characterized him in the moment of danger and in the face of death.

Some have explained the bold courage of the Japanese soldier as fatalism; but clear thinkers will not see in it a passive resignation, but rather a hopeful consummation of existence in men who are convinced of the final triumph of good over evil, and the calm assurance that the individual lives as long as he identifies himself with a noble thought, worthy work, exalted sentiment, uplifting im-

pulse, in short, with anything that cements the brotherly union of all mankind. Those who are accustomed to look at things from the individualistic point of view may not understand very clearly what I endeavor to explain; but the fact is that however tenacious we may cling to our individual existences, we are utterly helpless when that power which comprehends everything stands against our selfish desires. There is nothing left to us but to submit meekly to its eternal ordinance and to let it work out its own purpose regardless of ourselves. When Schleiermacher defines religion as a feeling of absolute dependence, he has rightly laid his hand on that indefinable and unclear longing which lurks in the dark recesses of every soul—a vague feeling which intuitively becomes aware of the weakness of the individual as such, but which possesses an immense strength as soon as the individual identifies himself with a supra-individual power. This is evidently neither fatalistic nor fantastic.

All sincere Buddhists are firmly convinced of the truth of non-egoism, and they do not think that the value of an individual as such is ultimate. On account of this, they are not at all disturbed at the moment of death; they calmly meet the end of life and let the world-destiny accomplish the purpose it may have in view. This emancipation from the individualistic limitations seems to have largely contributed to the perfection of the Japanese military culture known as *Bushido*. Old Japanese soldiers, nobles, and men of letters, therefore, displayed an almost gay cheerfulness even in the most critical moments of life, and they faced death unflinchingly, sometimes even in mirth. This buoyancy in which death is held in contempt stands in a marked contrast to the pious, prayerful attitude of the Christians, who look forward to their dying moments in a spirit of contrite penitence.

Ota Dokwan, a great Japanese statesman and general

of some four hundred years ago, was assassinated in his own castle by a band of spies sent by an enemy. They found him unarmed and stabbed him; and when he fell to the ground, the assassins before finishing their cowardly work asked what the general had to say before he bade farewell to this world; whereupon Dokwan calmly answered:

“To quit life which is sweet to me
Would truly a great hardship be,
Had I not come to the conclusion
That thought of self is an illusion.”

Finding peace of heart in this solution of life, Buddhists do not fear death; whatever may be their social positions, they are ever ready to lay down their lives for a higher cause which demands the sacrifice. They know that their present individual existences will come to an end, but they know at the same time that spiritually they live forever; and this higher conception of life together with a nobler interpretation of death has been contributed to Japanese culture by Buddhism.

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